

The Pisa Griffin and the Mari-Cha Lion

Metalwork, Art, and Technology in the Medieval Islamicate Mediterranean

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1.1 - Presenting the Pisa Griffin and the Mari-Cha Lion

Richard Camber and Anna Contadini

The Pisa Griffin

The Pisa Griffin (Fig. 1a) is 107 cm high to the top of the ear, 90 cm long and has a maximum width of 46 cm measured at the base of the wings. The body was formed in a single piece in leaded gunmetal using the technique of lost wax casting. The head resembles that of an eagle but has the wattles of a cockerel. The beak is open at the sides, with the curved upper mandible projecting over the lower (Fig. 2). It has four legs and feline feet (Figs. 3a-b), slightly rounded at the bottom, as if they were to be fitted onto a base, pedestal or column (as at present) to provide a grip. They are moulded on top in the form of rather toe-like claws. The wings, which must have been cast separately, are attached by rivets around the shoulders of the forelegs (Figs. 4a-d). There also some internal ones. On the exterior, there are in addition holes without nails the interpretation of which is uncertain. This suggests that the fitting of the wings was not straightforward. An aperture in the back of the left wing (Fig. 4e) reveals the type of finish inside, and that the wings are hollow: indeed, the discovery of some organic material found inside, tucked away towards the tips, was crucial for enabling carbon dating analysis to help determine the age of the Griffin.

1. a) The Pisa Griffin (right) and b) the Mari-Cha Lion (left) (Photos: Museum of Islamic Art, Doha)







4. The wings of the Griffin, showing: a-d) attachment by rivets; e) aperture behind the left wing (Photos: a and c: Museum of Islamic Art, Doha; b: Edoardo Loliva; d: Anna Contadini; e: Mirco Bassi)



Previous page:
2. The head of the Griffin
(Photo: Anna Contadini)

3a and b. The feet of the Griffin
(Photos: Anna Contadini)



There is an aperture at the rear, measuring 8 x 9.7 cm, where the tail should have been (Fig. 5), and a further irregular aperture in the belly, contemporary with the rest of the body, that occupies a considerable part of the belly (Fig. 6a). Within the belly is a vase-shaped vessel, measuring 24 cm in length and 9.5 cm in width at its widest, with slightly everted rims, facing forwards towards the front of the figure (Figs. 6b-c). Immediately behind the head and cast integrally with the rest of the figure is a triangular projection surmounted by a spherical knob (Fig. 7).

The decoration (Fig. 8) is cold engraved, using a variety of different instruments and organised in panels: there are semi-circular scales on the breast, with part of the inscription beneath (Fig. 8a), and incised plumes on the head, neck and wings (Figs. 8b-e). The back is decorated with a simulated saddlecloth embellished with concentric circles (Figs. 8f-g) between which is a pattern of crossed lines. An important discovery was the identification of a particular decorative instrument, a five-dot punch, characteristic of both Griffin and Lion, and also found on Spanish metalwork of the same period (Fig. 9).

At the base of each flank and chest appears the inscription. At the shoulder joints between the body and the legs there are shield-shaped panels containing, on the forelegs, the figure of a rampant lion and, on the hind legs, what appears to be an eagle (Fig. 10).

The legs have a protruding element, which is part of their modeling and contains an incised drop-like decorative element (Fig. 11).

The body has been penetrated in several places either by projectiles such as



6. a) Aperture on the belly of the Griffin; b and c) internal vessel (Photos: a: CNR; b and c: ISCR)



Previous page:
5. The rear of the Griffin, showing an aperture (Photo: Museum of Islamic Art, Doha)

7. The back of the Griffin, showing the triangular projection surmounted by a spherical knob (Photo: Museum of Islamic Art, Doha)



Next page:

8. Decoration on the Griffin:
a) breast; b) head; c) neck;
d) wings; e) detail of plumes;
f) saddlecloth pattern on the
back and g) rear (Photos: a
and d: Museum of Islamic Art,
Doha; b and f: ISCR; c and g:
Anna Contadini; e: Edoardo
Loliva)





9. Detail of the decoration on the Griffin showing the five-dot punch (Photo at raking light: Mirco Bassi)

musket balls or else by being struck with a sharp implement (Figs. 1a, 4c, 8d, 10c, 12, 13c).

The benedictory and augural *kufic* inscription on the front and sides of the saddlecloth (Fig. 13) reads as a continuum text from the left of the bronze to the right, as follows:

بركة كاملة ونعمة شاملة
غبطة كاملة وسلامة دائمة وعافية
كاملة وسعادة وعيدة لصاحبه

1. *baraka kāmila wa ni‘ma shāmila* (perfect blessing, complete favour)
2. *ghibṭa kāmila wa salāma dā‘ima wa ‘āfiya* (perfect felicity, lasting peace, good health)
3. *kāmila wa sa‘āda wa ‘īda li-ṣāḥibihi* (in full and the promise of happiness to its owner)



10. Animal decoration on the Griffin: a) lion above front right leg; b) lion above front left leg; c) eagle above back right leg; d) eagle above back left leg. (Photos: Museum of Islamic Art, Doha)



11. Protruding element on the leg of the Griffin containing an incised drop-like decorative element (Photo: Anna Contadini)



12. View of the top of the Griffin, with a hole in the head (Photo: ISCR)



13. Inscriptions on the Griffin: top to bottom a) left side; b) front; c) right side (Photos: Museum of Islamic Art, Doha)



Next page:
14a and b. The Mari-Cha Lion (Photos: a: Matthew Hollow; b: Museum of Islamic Art, Doha)

15. Opening in the belly of the Lion (Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art)



16. Vessel inside the Lion (Photo: Anna Contadini)





17a and b. The head of the Lion
(Photos: a: Matthew Hollow;
b: Peter Northover)

The Mari-Cha Lion

Having lost the lower part of its legs, the Mari-Cha Lion (Figs. 1b and 14) is 45 cm high and 73 cm long. The body was formed in a single piece in unleaded bronze using the technique of lost wax casting. There is a rectangular aperture in the belly (Fig. 15), and, inside, a vase-shaped vessel with a narrow neck and everted rim which was cast integrally with the figure, measuring 21.5 cm in length and 16.5 cm in width, at its widest (Fig. 16). Also cast integrally with the head are two recesses on the nose (Fig. 17). Their function is unclear, but might be related to *prometopidia* or noseguards (derived from a Late Antique form). Added to the left ear is an engraved triangular feature that may be understood as a heater shield (Fig. 18). Like the Griffin, the Lion also once had a tail, which is now missing (Figs. 19a and b).

As with the Griffin, the decoration is cold engraved, using a variety of different instruments, including the five-dot punch (Fig. 20) discovered on the Griffin, and organised in panels: on the breast there are inverted plumes, with part of the inscription beneath, and there are similar inverted plumes around the neck (Figs. 21a-c). The rest of the inscription is positioned at the base of each flank. The back is likewise decorated with a simulated saddlecloth enriched with concentric circles (Fig. 21d-e) between which is a pattern of crossed lines. At the shoulder joints between the body and the legs there are shield-shaped panels containing, on the forelegs, the figure of a griffin and, on the hind legs, the figure of a bird of prey (Fig. 22).

Similarly to the Griffin, the body of the Lion has been penetrated in several places by projectiles such as musket balls, as well as being struck with a sharp implement (Figs. 1b, 21e, 23).

The benedictory and augural *kufic* inscription, on the front, and on the sides of the saddlecloth, reads as follows, starting from the left hand side (Fig. 24):

نعمة وبركة وعافية

وسلامة وسعادة ويمن

وكرامة وبقا لصاحبه

1. *ni 'ma wa baraka wa 'āfiya* (Favour and blessing and good health)
2. *wa salāma wa sa 'āda wa yumn* (and peace and happiness and prosperity)
3. *wa karāma wa baqā li-ṣāhibihi* (and honour and long life to its owner).



18. Engraved shield on left ear of the Lion
(Photo: Peter Northover)

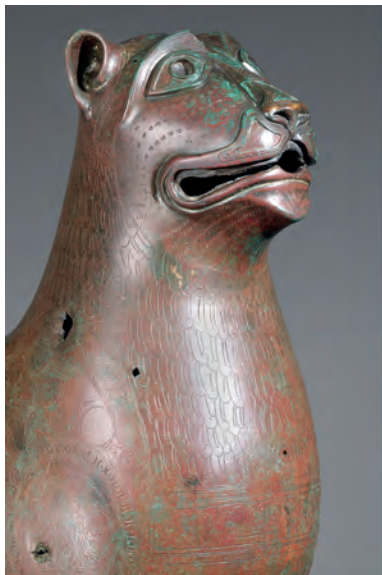
19a and b. Rear view of the Lion (showing where the tail would have been attached)
(Photos: a: Museum of Islamic Art, Doha; b: Anna Contadini)

20. Detail of decorative five-dot punch on the Lion (Photo at raking light: Mirco Bassi)

21. Decoration on the Lion: a) neck; b) breast; c) back of neck; d) saddlecloth pattern on the side and e) back (Photos: a: Matthew Hollow; b and d: Museum of Islamic Art, Doha; c and e: Peter Northover)

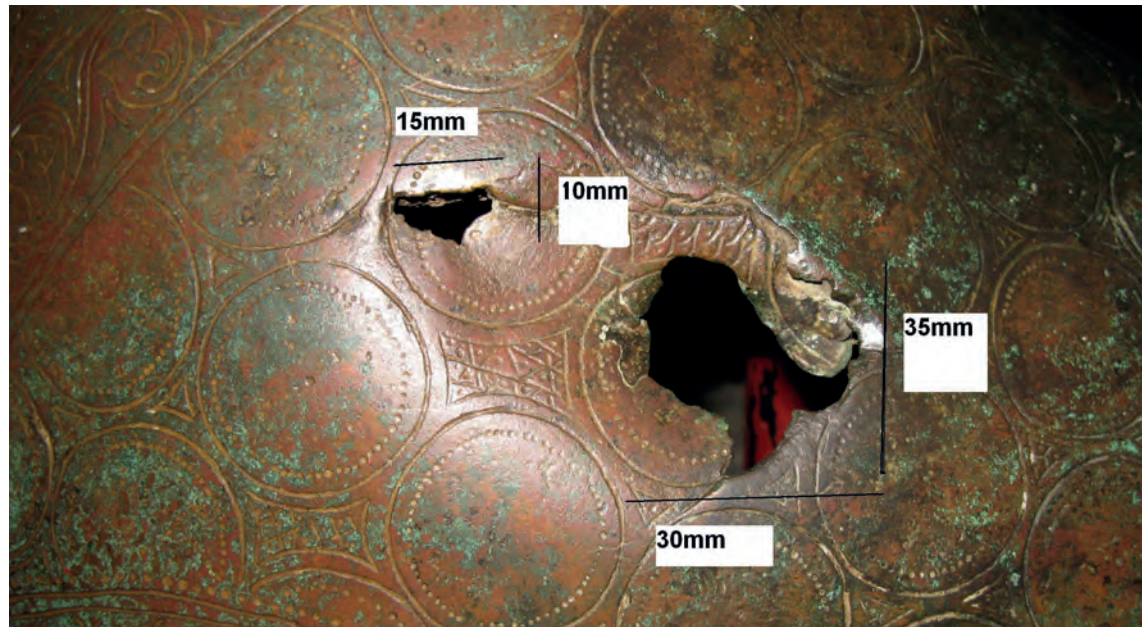
Next page:

22. Animal decoration on the Lion: a) griffin above front right leg; b) griffin above front left leg; c) bird of prey above back right leg; d) bird of prey above back left leg (Photos: Matthew Hollow)





23. Damage on the Lion
(Photo: Museum of Islamic
Art, Doha)



24. Inscriptions on the Lion:
top to bottom a) left side; b)
front; c) right side (Photos:
Matthew Hollow)

